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Viewing cable 08MOSCOW2563, MEDVEDEV LOSES OUT IN RUSSIA-GEORGIA WAR

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08MOSCOW2563	2008-08-26 14:04	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Moscow

Appears in these articles:

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PP RUEHWEB

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 002563

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: MEDVEDEV LOSES OUT IN RUSSIA-GEORGIA WAR

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary. Unlike Putin, whose leadership during the Chechen war strengthened his political power, Medvedev's performance to date has reinforced his status as junior member of the tandem. Two anecdotal reports suggest that

Putin was displeased with the President's performance at the start of the conflict; Putin, not Medvedev, set the tone and tenor of Russia's war policy. The conflict exposed Medvedev's weaknesses, his lack of a "team" of advisers, and the paucity of levers that he holds to influence policy, particularly in foreign affairs. While most Russians have yet to calculate the long-term consequences of the Georgian war, a near term conclusion is that the conflict has reinforced Medvedev's need for a "regent" and validated Putin as the man most Russians trust to protect their national interests. End Summary.

Medvedev Stumbles

12. (C) The war in Georgia capped Medvedev's first 100 days in office, and provided him the chance for a defining moment as the country's military and political chieftain. Yet, two anecdotal reports suggests that Medvedev blinked when the Georgian conflict began. xxxxx told the German Ambassador that Putin was deeply concerned by the failure of Medvedev to take immediate actions and to show resolve on August 8. Putin intervened repeatedly from Beijing, where he was attending the Olympics. Several phone calls took place between the Prime Minister and Medvedev, with Putin using a meeting with Kazakh President Nazarbayev to set the initial Russian public hard-line. Similarly, in either an indiscretion or a deliberate slight, FM Lavrov confided to the French Ambassador (on the margins of Sarkozy's August 12 visit to Moscow) that Medvedev had come in for significant criticism among the ruling party elite for his handling of the initial hours of the crisis.

13. (C) At first glance, the interaction between the two during the Georgia war appeared a confirmation of the "regency" model of leadership posited by many Kremlin observers about the tandem, with Putin taking charge when his protege faltered and then stepping back once he had righted the ship of state. Putin, not Medvedev, made the first strong public Russian address on the conflict after his return from China. His bristling speech in Vladikavkaz on August 9 set the tone and message of Moscow's approach: accusations of genocide, promises of aid to mitigate the "humanitarian disaster," and an explanation of Russian action as justified and legitimate. In the days that followed, a pale and tired Medvedev met with various military and government officials before the television cameras, but he never addressed the people directly -- in part because Putin had already done so. Olga Kryshtanovskaya of the Academy of Sciences Institute for the Study of Elites characterized Medvedev's performance during the first days of the war as a schoolboy who learned his lessons by rote, but without the vehemence of true conviction. Indeed, at one of the few public meetings between Putin and Medvedev, the Premier resorted to "suggestions" that the military prosecutor should look into evidence of "genocide" in South Ossetia, and Medvedev duly agreed to give the order.

14. (C) As the conflict cooled down and Medvedev took a visible role in hammering out a ceasefire agreement with French President Sarkozy, the public portrayal of the tandem began to shift back to its "proper" balance, even as the French told us it was Putin who joined the meeting to broker the "Medvedev-Sarkozy" agreement. Medvedev moved to the forefront of Russia's government controlled television stage and Putin returned to focus on other matters. According to the newspaper Kommersant, Levada Center polls in August showed a slight increase in popular perceptions of Medvedev's position in the tandem, with 14 percent of respondents agreeing that real power is in the President's hands, up from 9 percent in June, but still far below the near 20 percent figure at the time of Medvedev's inauguration. Tellingly, nearly half of respondents saw Medvedev and Putin sharing power.

15. (C) Few are surprised that Medvedev was unprepared for the Georgian war. Before the conflict, Medvedev had focused on domestic issues that had been his forte as Deputy Premier. He had taken initial steps in his first three months in office to define himself: promoting the domestic themes of anti-corruption, economic modernization, and, in foreign policy, a new European security architecture. He also went as far as indirect criticism of Putin's attack on the Mechel coal company in late July. Pro-Kremlin commentators like lawyer Pavel Astakov and analyst Dmitriy Orlov in recent weeks penned paeans to what they claimed were Medvedev's successes in launching judicial reforms, promoting small business, and tackling the thorny issue of pervasive corruption.

16. (C) While debates have continued over whether Medvedev is a "liberal" or a Putin flunky, there is general consensus that Medvedev remains circumscribed in his ability act independently. xxxxx conceded that Medvedev had ambitions and was being pushed by his inner circle (largely remnants of the Yeltsin team) to be "more liberal," but he had no capacity to carry them through. xxxxx attributed this to Putin's shift of Kremlin cadre to the White House -- a move that left Medvedev largely adrift in his own administration. Editor/owner of the independent xxxxx judged Medvedev politically naive, despite 17 years in the inner circle. xxxxx who with eight other prominent editors attended a long, liquid dinner with the President, described Medvedev as saying the right things, but with no clear ability to translate them into practice.

17. (C) While Medvedev spoke vaguely of new European security structures, some argued that Putin remained the real foreign policy helmsman, who used informal relations and the creation of new White House entities to forge his own policy team. The newly appointed Director of the Russian Institute for Democracy in NY, Andranik Migranyan, judged to us that even before the Georgia crisis, Medvedev had taken a beating in foreign policy, with the appointment of Ambassador Yuri Ushakov to the White House a clear sign of Putin's encroachment on Kremlin turf. Medvedev lacked a foreign policy team, and his hesitancy, or "lack of tonality," on important issues was apparent in the diplomatic mishap at the G8 over Zimbabwe. Migranyan predicted that Putin would continue to dominate the policy milieu through his connection to the intelligence services and deployment of Ushakov.

Looking Ahead

18. (C) For those who see Putin as protecting and developing his successor as "regent" -- including xxxxx and Gleb Pavlovskiy -- the conflict gave some indication of Medvedev's strengths and weakness during times of crisis. Medvedev stills needs Putin, according to Pavlovskiy, as the primary source of the President's legitimacy. If Putin were to leave office today, Medvedev would have a tough fight; in the eyes of half the Russian public, trust of Putin constitutes Medvedev's writ. Kryshtanovskaya argued that Putin cannot afford to allow Medvedev to lose his legitimacy as president, in that Putin has staked his reputation on his successor.

19. (C) For others, the war showed that Medvedev is not up to challenge of leadership. Russian Caucasus experts told DCM August 21 that Russia could not show weakness in the face of Georgia's challenge in South Ossetia for fear of both external and internal security consequences. Putin, not Medvedev, understood that and orchestrated the required action to meet the challenge, they argued.

110. (C) While most of our contacts agreed that 100 days is too short to draw conclusions, xxxxx and Kryshtanovskaya predicted the war could hasten a shift towards a parliamentary system. xxxxx characterized Putin's public persona as Russia's CEO, rolling up his sleeves on issues that matter more to Russians while Medvedev handles the ceremonial duties of President. He likened the situation to

the German model, which Putin well understands, and posited that the Premier may aspire to play Chancellor to Medvedev's German President. Kryshtanovskaya likewise sees Putin as laying the foundation for a parliamentary republic, by taking the lead of Russia's most politically powerful party and shifting many formerly presidential functions to the White House.

Comment

¶11. (C) After the Georgian conflict, nobody questions Putin's dominance of the political system. What remains to be seen is whether he intends to transfer the power mantle to Medvedev, as the "regency" school predicts, or to further consolidate his power as Premier. Putin's modus operandi is to create options and to avoid picking one particular path, suggesting that we will see him continue to follow both options as he waits to see how things play out. Among the populace, there is a sense of national pride and patriotism as the vast majority of Russians rally around the Kremlin. The success of Moscow's "short, victorious war" accrues to the tandem team, although we assess more so to Putin than the President. The Russian elite, highly attuned to signals from the Kremlin, are likely to see the Georgian war as evidence that it is too early to dismiss the influence of the silovik wing or its captain, Putin. And in light of the Kremlin wagon-circling we expect to follow the independence recognition decision, Medvedev's agenda of economic modernization, anti-corruption, and European security focus will lose any sense of urgency that it might have had. End comment.
Beyrle